

BRIDGE—Main span of the Tri-Borough, connecting Queens and Ward's Island



PARK—A rural hillside in the miles of new park land along the Hudson River.



ROADS—Complex of parkways at an intersection in Queens. Full speed

The Achievements of Robert Moses

By ROBERT BENDINER

IF Robert Moses were the kind of man who ever looked backward, even from the vantage point of a sixty-fifth birthday (his takes place this Friday), he could contemplate more in the way of solid, tangible achievement than most men dream of in a lifetime. And much that is not tangible, for the pleasure afforded by the sight of flowering dogwood on the margin of a parkway or the graceful arch of a bridge are not measurable in miles of concrete or tons of steel. It is no longer possible to walk fifteen minutes anywhere in the City of New York without running into a building, a span, a road, a park, an improvement of some sort which this master builder has not had an energetic hand in—as initiator, coordinator, or slasher of red tape.

To see the metropolitan area without the Moses imprint you would have to ignore the spectacular complex of bridges, tunnels, and roadways that make up the Triborough Bridge system; you would have to blind yourself to the network of parkways and expressways that circle the city and wind

for scores of miles through up-state country and eastward through Long Island; and you would have to forget the model seaside resorts like Jones Beach and public country clubs like the Bethpage Golf Course.

You would have to shut your eyes to huge housing developments on the sites of ancient slums; to swimming pools, small parks, and monuments scattered from Spuyten Duyvil to Jamaica to Staten Island. You would have to think of the Manhattan bank of the Hudson as the grimy stretch of railroad, scraggly brush, and pokey traffic which it once was. And you would have to see Central Park as it looked before Bob Moses came along, its grass choked with weeds, its trees dying, its zoo a reeking eyesore stocked with mangy specimens, its restaurant a private concession run for those who could afford 40 cents for a cup of coffee.

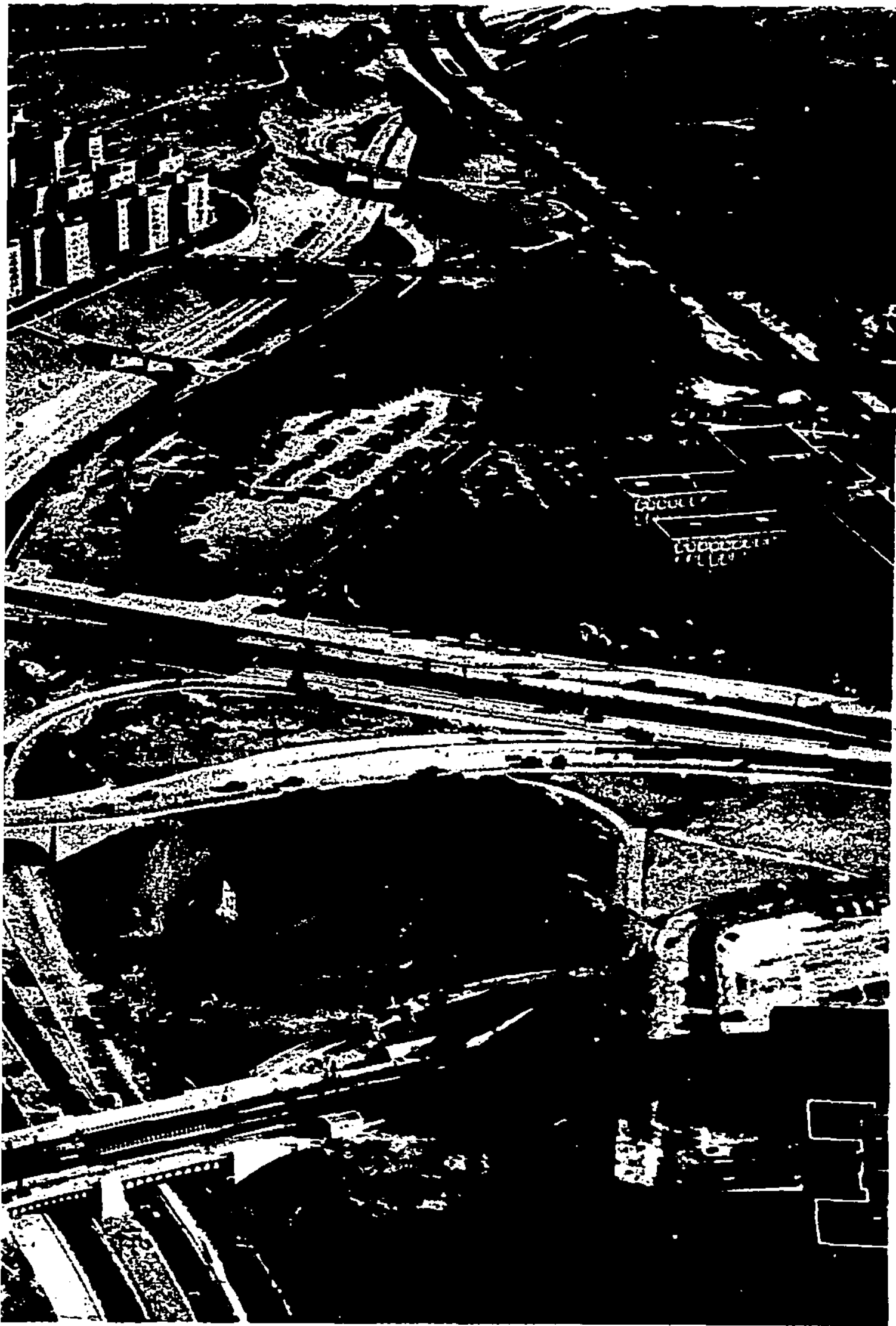
You would also have to imagine New York without one of the most salty, explosive, combative, and at the same time dedicated and unselfish public servants the city has ever boasted.

Never one to suffer fools gladly or critics willingly, Robert Moses shows no signs of, mellowing at 65. As we



Robert Moses—"One of the most salty, explosive, and at the same time dedicated and unselfish public servants the city has ever boasted."

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ahead to all points north, south, east and west.

They are a roll-call of projects that have changed much of the face of New York. At 65, he continues a remarkable career.

drove along Bronx and Manhattan parkways that he had reared from blueprints, the Great Doer and sworn enemy of theoretical planners paid his habitual respects to "goo-goos," "phoneys," "smart alecks," and other detractors of his work; cogently explained why decisions he had made, from Van Cortlandt Park to Coney Island, were right and inevitable; expounded a contagious faith in the city's future; and displayed by turns gusty and sunny aspects of a nature that in nearly thirty public years has become almost as much a feature of New York as the skyline.

ASKED to name the four or five works he regards as his major contributions, he looked genuinely abashed, afflicted with a strange un-Moses-like reticence. "Someone else should do the appraising," he said at last. "I don't like this idea of fragmentation, anyway, this notion that I work on isolated projects." Then he added, "If I had to make a choice, I would say that the playgrounds and indoor recreation centers take precedence over the big developments—at least now. Twenty years from now it may be different."

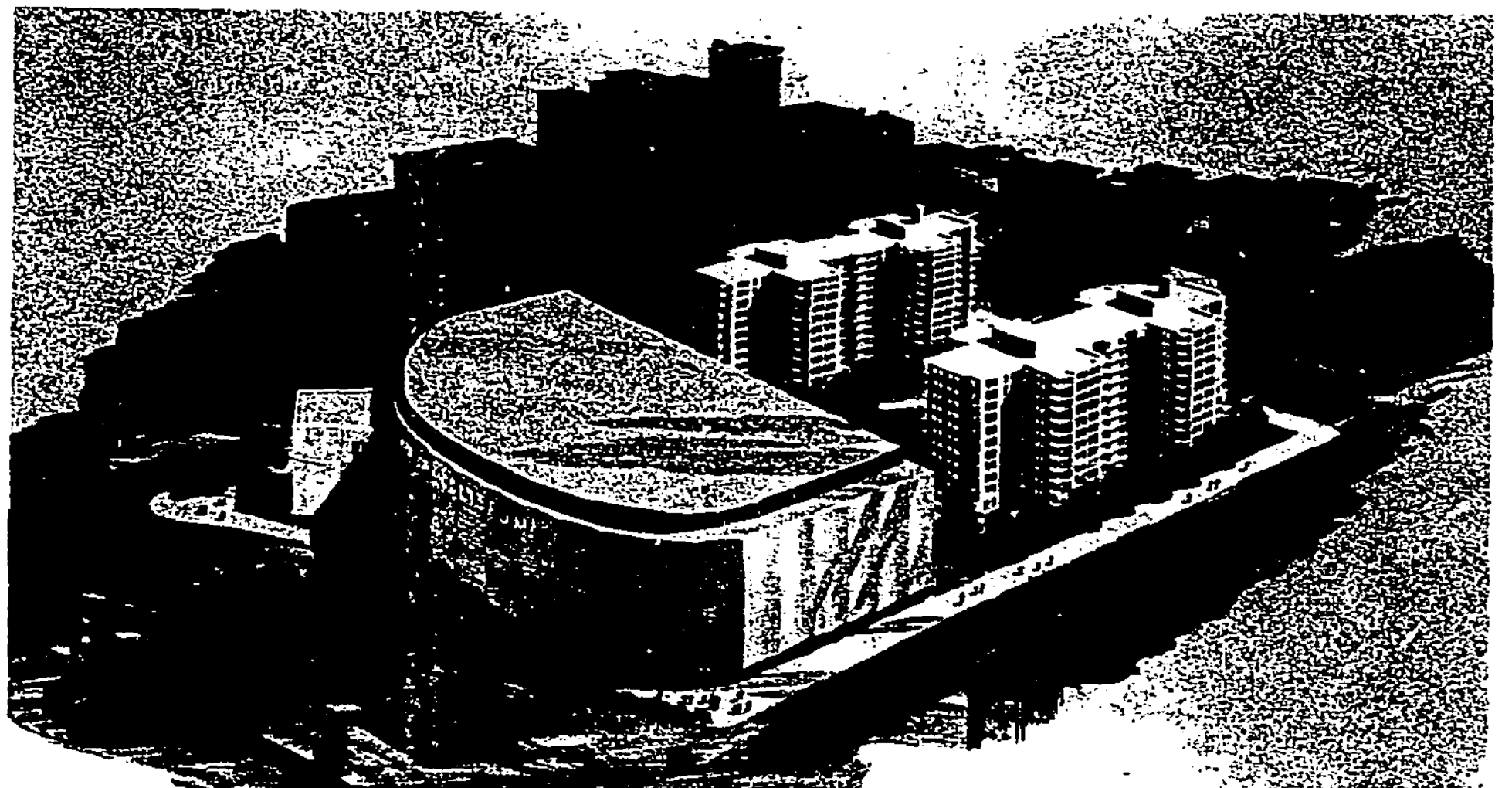
Bob Moses works at 65 much as he

worked at 34, when he prepared for Gov. Alfred E. Smith "A State Park Plan for New York" and launched a career devoted with rare intensity of purpose to the physical improvement of a state and a city. The formula is simple: one step at a time, give it everything you have, without reference to past or future projects, and slash your opponents' to ribbons. Once the immediate fight is won, forget it and build the project. If it isn't won, take a good compromise if you can or drop the whole idea and get on to the next order of business. Anything goes in the heat of battle, but when it's over there is no time for, and no point in, either apologies or rancor.

A civic leader who has worked with, and against, Moses for more than a quarter of a century thinks the fiery temperament, the verbal pyrotechnics, the blistering letters (often circulated in multiple)—all are consciously used techniques to discourage casual objections and scare off shallow, pettifogging critics. If an opponent feels strongly enough to stick to his guns and eventually wins, Moses will bow to defeat and with no trace of vindictiveness throws himself into the revised program.



BEACH—Recaptured from the dunes and the sea is Jones Beach, one of many new resorts for the city.



BUILDING—Plan for the Coliseum to rise in Columbus Circle. Behind it will be a new housing project.

It is this pattern of lusty, all-out battle for each project in turn that gives rise to the criticism of Mr. Moses that he is not so much a city planner as a furiously energetic and efficient executor of isolated enterprises. Moses appears to resent deeply, and with reason, this charge that he has merely spotted the city with haphazard good works. For all his violent assaults on the "ivory-tower planners," he considers himself a true planner and his opponents mere dreamers, empty talkers, "eunuchs who know how to do everything and never do anything."

AS we drove through Riverdale, Moses pointed out parcels of land along the Hudson that he had shrewdly pinned down for the city, sites for parks that may be built only when he has ceased to be the city's Park Commissioner, chairman of the State Council of Parks, New York City Construction Coordinator, and half a dozen other top officials rolled into one dynamic person. "Is that long-range or short-range?" he asked. Or he would talk of the enormous future of the Jamaica Bay area—one day to become the "greatest addition to its recreational area" in the history of the city.

"Why it's a miracle," he says, "that some of us have lived long enough to realize the long-range objectives we set up."

Moses dissociates himself from those who talk about grand "master-plans" because in his opinion they—meaning men like Frank Lloyd Wright, Lewis Mumford and Rexford G. Tugwell—have abandoned the whole concept of the city as we know it. "Their idea always has been dispersion, decentralization, greenbelts." Moses, on the contrary, accepts the city, believes wholeheartedly in its future, and seeks to strengthen a "magnetic core" which he expects to retain its magnetism for a long while to come.

In strengthening that core, he pursues what he considers a natural and inevitable progression: housing calls for recreational facilities, parks for parkways, traffic arteries for parking facilities, and so forth, each project leading to the next in a pragmatic and logical process which has no need of "master plans." Noting his multiple jobs, observers often ask him which hat he is wearing at a given moment or in a particular skirmish. "Nothing irritates me more," he says, than this implication (Continued on Page 26)

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that he is a quick-change artist acting separately in his various capacities. "I don't collect hats."

If Moses can look back on a breath-taking series of achievements, he can also review a succession of rows that have given the city some of its most boisterous moments in a third of a century. "I know I have the reputation for being a sort of rough guy," he once remarked. "But you can't accomplish anything in an old community like New York without hurting someone's feelings. I know the old saying about catching more flies with sugar than with vinegar, but I am not in the fly-catching business. In order to build parks and highways some blasting is necessary. You can't always be diplomatic."

* * *

More than a few New Yorkers, including friends and admirers of the Commissioner, think he means "you can't ever be diplomatic." For a list of those who have been on the receiving end of a Moses blast is virtually a metropolitan Who's Who. His life with La Guardia was a cycle of storms, resignations and reconciliations. Other Mayors received the full Moses treatment.

Jimmy Walker he put down as "half Beau Brummell and half guttersnipe"; O'Brien as a "winded bull in the municipal chinashop"; Hylan as "the ranting Bozo of Bushwick" and McKee as "a synthetic character which never actually lived on sea or land, puffed up by the press . . . and now in process of disintegration." But he worked easily with O'Dwyer and Impellitteri, both of whom gave him free rein. He kept up a running feud with Roosevelt, engaged in a struggle with Ickes over funds for the Triborough Bridge, and has figured in peppery encounters with a score of public figures ranging from W. Kingsland Macy to Dag Hammarskjold.

* * *

Neither the politics nor the social station of a Moses target has ever made the slightest difference in his approach. The gentry of Long Island's North Shore, bitterly opposed to having a public thoroughfare impinge on their exclusive preserves, brought enormous pressure at Albany to block the building of the Northern State Parkway in the Twenties. When one of them rashly complained that "the last real fox-hunting country" in the state would be ruined if concrete were allowed to throw hounds off the scent, Moses tartly suggested, "Perhaps we can build a tunnel under the road for the fox." When the West Side Improvement got under way, squatters with no-

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where else to go got short shrift; so did yacht clubs.

Cleveland Rodgers, his biographer, cites such bits as the following to exemplify a letter-writing style that has won Moses national recognition as a master of this form of English prose:

Dear Commissioner: . . .

This letter ranks high among the most asinine communications from a public official I have had the privilege of seeing in many years, and I boldly claim to have been the wastebasket for a lot of this stuff . . .

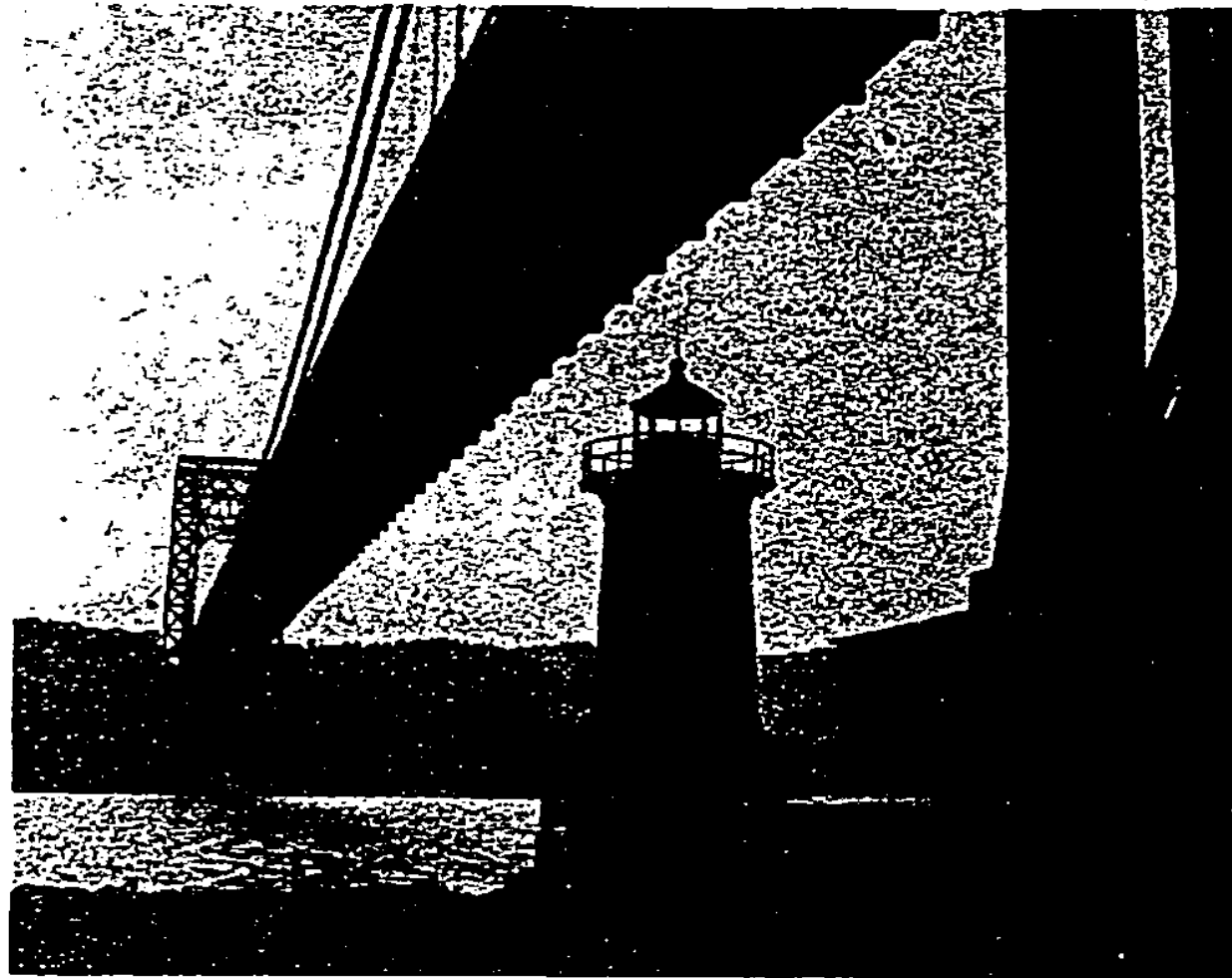
Dear Sir: This will acknowledge your rhetorical effort of September 14. Stripped of personal vituperation and irrelevant guff, your protest boils down to this . . .

The compliments, of course, traveled a two-way street. "Beneficent Caesar of the Parks," as John Gunther called him, is typical of the titles bestowed on Moses for his autocratic manner. La Guardia liked to refer to him as "His Grace" and "Oberburgomeister."

In spite of his onslaughts, however, Moses is no holder of grudges. At a social affair he will meet one whom he has called a fool or a liar only a few days before and be all charm, and grace, and warmth. In fact, one of his acquaintances says, Moses would be astonished to discover that his target of the day before felt in the least aggrieved. In publicly composing his quarrel with Ickes, he remarked: "I have never been much anyway at harboring bad feeling for a long time, first, because it is not my natural disposition; second, because I am too busy * * * and, finally, because it is a well-established fact that venom and bitterness are bad for the chemistry of the soul."

* * *

Those who have been roughly used by the Commissioner are among the most ardent in insisting on his enormous value to the city. I asked one of these critics, a man whom Moses had treated contemptuously in public more than once, whether others couldn't have redeemed the city's park system back in the depression days, when Federal money



Little lighthouse at the Washington Bridge: Moses helped save it.

flowed free and a pool of W. P. A. labor was always available. "No," he said, "no one else could have put through a quarter of the program that Moses did. He is the ablest man I've ever known." Richard Childs, formerly head of the Citizens' Union, has fought Moses for half a lifetime but

would like to see him Mayor of New York.

Moses is a man of almost endless paradox. A Republican and a foe of the New Deal, he has done his best work under the least conservative auspices. His greatest tributes, moreover, have been reserved for Democrats and mavericks. If

one man more than any other helped to shape his career, it was Alfred E. Smith, whom he calls "the greatest Governor of our time." For all the turbulence of his days with La Guardia, he thinks of him not merely as a good Mayor, but "the best in our history." In spite of their long feud, he has ranked Roosevelt with Wilson and Willkie as "three of our greatest American evangelists," men whose true significance will be appreciated only "when the immediate concerns and acerbities of our times are forgotten."

* * *

A product of Yale and Oxford, Moses seems to enjoy presenting himself as a rough-hewn, hard-bitten, colloquial sort, for whom the verbal coin of intellectuals is a mystery, mere words beyond his understanding. A Ph.D. at 25, an excellent writer, and a thorough-going student of his craft, it is unlikely that he really thinks of himself in any such light. It is just that, as he puts it, he is "against fellows who talk and don't do, (Continued on Following Page)

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who are impatient with everything but the distant scene."

Theories and theorizers leave him cool and dogmas downright cold. He is for economy in government, for example, but not if it gets in the way of a needed program, however long range in scope. "We are not rewriting Poor Richard's Almanac, or re-establishing the economic civic standards of the nineteenth century." He is against over-centralization, but "the notion that there are fixed and unchangeable areas in which public and private officials function independently is now entertained only by the most unteachable mossbacks . . ." He is a quick man to blast those he calls "pinks," but all the same, "we are committed to the democratic principle that the good things, as well as the necessities of life, must be given people all the way down the line, and not merely to the upper and middle levels."

* * *

Moses himself has managed to run a private fortune into the ground in the course of his public service. Of all the posts he holds, with their lofty titles and hard work, only one carries any salary. The \$25,000 a year he collects as the city's Park Commissioner is his total income from government. He has spent more than a billion dollars of public money, yet no faint suggestion of impropriety has ever been heard concerning its disbursement. And political power as such means no more to him than financial advantage. But if you consider that good government, don't ever make the mistake of calling him a goo-goo.

Don't imply that he may be motivated by strong social feelings, either. At the merest such hint, he bristles. "You're not going to call me a social worker, are you?" he asked in what sounded like real horror. Yet few New Yorkers are not substantially and materially better off because Robert Moses has lived and worked here.

When he stepped into office in 1934, New York's children had 117 playgrounds. They now have 600. In four years he jammed through a fifteen-year program for Central Park, including flowers, trees, a model zoo, a supervised cafeteria with fixed prices, and baseball diamonds and playgrounds in place of signs warning kids to keep off the nonexistent grass.

* * *

The people of the world's greatest seaport, thanks largely to Mr. Moses, at last have access to their beaches, from Coney Island to Montauk. "In this effective process, begun in the nick of time," he has written "you can see genuine as distinguished from academic planning, the real thing as contrasted with the chatter of amateurs." No false modesty there, perhaps, but no false claim either.

Great housing developments now replace huge slum areas

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on Manhattan's lower East Side, and if Moses was not exactly a partisan of public housing in the beginning, he was a dynamo in getting it built once the program was adopted. The Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, created to build a single bridge, now includes under the Moses management a system of sixteen bridges, miles of highway, a sports center and stadium on Randalls Island, and a projected Coliseum and housing development in the heart of Manhattan.

* * *

The planning of the United Nations center, the new airline terminal on First Avenue, the 120 miles of expressway built in the past ten years alone, the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel—all have drawn on the volcanic energies and administrative skill of Robert Moses. So have dozens of minor but picturesque touches, like the saving of the little lighthouse under the George Washington Bridge and the salvaging of an old-time carrousel for Central Park.

Nobody could do what Moses has done and not make mistakes—in esthetics, politics, engineering and simple human relations. His critics will count off what they consider his blunders—from his current plans for Washington Square to his fight against the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel in favor of a bridge, what most observers agreed would gravely have marred the beauty of Battery Park. He freely admits to having made mistakes in the past, but he will not say what they were. "Everybody makes mistakes," he says. "Why advertise them?"

* * *

New Yorkers will no doubt go on, as they should, questioning a Moses proposal here and rejecting one there, touching off picturesque displays of temperament in the process. But they are, and have reason to be, profoundly grateful for a man whose mark on the city is comparable only with that of Baron Haussmann's on Paris.

Probably the closest Moses has ever come to examining his own motivations in public was the after-dinner speech in which he asked himself what it was that kept him going. "It is partly interest in the work," he answered, "and partly sheer stubbornness." And then he went on:

"Certainly there are no material rewards comparable to those which can be expected from similar devotion to private work. I made up my mind long ago to get my reward from tangible accomplishments, from the dogwood, the tulip, the chrysanthemum, the curving parkway, the spiderwork of suspension bridges, the reclaimed waterfront, the demolition of slums, the crack of a baseball bat and the shouting of children in playgrounds."

By now he must feel well rewarded.

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